

University of Toronto
Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board

Ethical Guidelines on Interviewing Public Personalities

This document offers guidelines on the preparation of ethical protocols involving the use of public personalities in research, particularly through interviews. It is based on the spirit of the principles included in the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (1998). These guidelines were prepared by a sub-committee in political science, chaired by Professor Jacques Bertrand and were approved by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board on August 19, 2003.

Overall principles

1. Research in the social sciences often involves individual interviews of public personalities. These are individuals who are interviewed because of the roles they play or positions they hold in government, public or private organizations, the media, the arts, public campaigns, or even public demonstrations.
2. Research involving public personalities should follow the general ethical principles included in the Tri-Council Policy Statement. Among the most relevant for this type of research, they include:
 - a. The right to privacy and confidentiality
 - b. Respect for free and informed consent
3. Research involving public personalities should recognize two particular dimensions:
 - a. The degree to which individuals are in the “public eye”: Some individuals may be official representatives of public organizations, politicians, journalists, heads of organizations, frequently quoted in the media, or used to speaking in public. However, other public personalities may include mid-level or even lower level officials of public organizations, such as government departments, non-governmental organizations, businesses. These individuals may be less familiar with interviews and therefore require that researchers take greater care to obtain free and informed consent and respect the right to confidentiality.
 - b. Degree of vulnerability: it is generally recognized that public personalities, by virtue of their position or their work within public organizations, are exposed to public scrutiny and criticism. In some contexts, individuals pursue their public activities with high degree of personal risk. In authoritarian settings, for example, members of opposition groups may expose their views publicly, knowing that they might be persecuted or even killed. More often, the degree of risk in exposing their views may entail retribution from superiors, criticism from peers, loss of employment, or damage to reputation. The greater the risk to individuals, the more researchers should take care to ensure free and informed consent, and to respect the right to confidentiality.
4. Research on public policy can often be critical of organizations or individuals who are interviewed. Such research entails, at times, that researchers might not

fully share with public personalities the use of interview material or the full purpose of the study. Researchers should weigh the necessity of such concealment against the potential harm to interviewees. They should be particularly careful to avoid harming individuals beyond their public roles.

Preparing protocols

In preparing protocols, researchers should reflect on the general principles of the Tri-Council statement and how they can best be implemented in the context of interviewing public personalities. Preparation of a protocol places the burden on the researcher to clearly explain the reasons for choosing a particular kind of process for obtaining informed consent and for respecting the right to privacy. Researchers should build a convincing case for any proposed process, taking into account the ethical principles of the Tri-Council Statement, the guidelines for public personalities, the type of research and the particular context of the research. Protocols should provide ample and clear information on these processes. The researcher must demonstrate that they have weighed potential risks against the benefits of the research, and considered the particularities of the context in assessing particular means of ensuring ethical standards.

1. When seeking consent for interviews, researchers should normally seek to obtain written consent. However, given the time constraints of public personalities, the sensitivities of some political contexts, and some other circumstances, the researcher can propose alternative means of seeking consent. Such consent may be obtained verbally or at the time of scheduling an interview (via an introduction letter, e-mail or fax, for example). Ethical protocols should specify the reasons for seeking an alternative consent process. These should be weighed against the potential risks to the individuals interviewed and the degree of the public nature of their positions, as specified in point 3 above. Researchers using verbal consent or an alternative consent process should provide sample consent scripts or letters in their protocols.
2. The less individuals' positions entail a public or representative role, or the less they are familiar with interviews and voicing their positions publicly, the more researchers should seek to obtain **written** informed consent and clarify confidentiality processes. For example, it might be acceptable to develop a protocol with a minimal requirement for consent and guarantees of confidentiality when interviewing politicians, heads of organizations, public relations officers of corporations, journalists, or academics, who would be used to interviews and would be most likely to know how to protect themselves or their organizations. Such assumptions would be less true for members of organizations who play less of a public role and may never be called upon to represent their organization.
3. The most detailed consent scripts or letters contain information about the nature of the research, the researcher's identity, the participant's role, the right to confidentiality, the right to terminate the interview at any given time, use of audio-tapes, risks and benefits of the research (See Checklist for informed consent documents, available from Research Services and through the web-page below). It may not be appropriate, feasible, or necessary to include all of the above

- requirements to obtain informed consent from public personalities for interviews. Researchers should justify the level of detail required for consent in relation to the context of their research, if they must exclude some of the above requirements.
4. The right to confidentiality is usually stated at the time of seeking consent for an interview. Agreements on confidentiality may vary. They might include complete anonymity of the interviewee and no direct quotes; permission to use some quotes while keeping the identity anonymous; permission to identify the individual in publications and to use direct quotes. The less individuals are used to interviews or to playing a public role, the more researchers should ensure that permission has been adequately obtained to publish interview materials, share them with other researchers or other people, or identify the individuals. Protocols should be clear about the ways to guarantee that the interviewee has fully consented to the publication of her/his name or use of direct quotes.
 5. Researchers should provide more guarantees of confidentiality and a more detailed consent process when planning interviews with public personalities who may expose themselves to potential retribution from their superiors or governmental authorities.
 6. In authoritarian contexts, or under conditions of political instability, the personal risk to public personalities can be much higher than in democratic contexts. Researchers should take additional precautions to ensure that informed consent is obtained and confidentiality requirements are met. In these cases, researchers may wish to include a consent process in their protocols that more explicitly addresses the means by which consent will be obtained to quote individuals or publish their names. In cases where the interview can cause a very high personal risk to public personalities, the researcher should justify the importance of conducting these interviews for the success of the research project.

These guidelines should be used in addition to the documents and information available from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board web page at: http://www.research.utoronto.ca/ethics_hscommittees.html#social